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Summary

¶1. (SBU) Representative Hastings, my staff and I warmly welcome your visit. As you are aware, Morocco is a member of the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership and has hosted OSCE meetings in Rabat, but there is potential for more engagement. Morocco has given us exemplary cooperation in the struggle against terrorism and it serves as a regional model for economic change and democratic reform. Our military and political cooperation is growing, and as a result, Morocco has been designated as a "Major Non-NATO Ally." Morocco also maintains low-key contacts with Israel due in part to the many Israelis of Moroccan origin. Morocco's principal foreign tie is with Europe and has advanced status with the European Union (EU). Morocco is one of our strongest allies in the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) region, and its top priority is U.S. support for its position on the Western Sahara territorial dispute and for integration in North Africa.

¶2. (SBU) Since your last visit in 2004, Morocco has remained a country "on the move", in the throes, albeit unevenly, of change and reform. Economic growth has averaged about six percent per year and investment, tourism and remittances have boomed, although they could be threatened by the downturn in Europe. Slums are coming down, and according to official statistics, so is unemployment. Freedom of the press has expanded to a level not seen here ever before and beyond the rest of the region, but there are still some restrictions, and those who challenge them can suffer heavy fines, libel judgments and more rarely, jail. Political freedoms have grown as well, although they remain constrained by a system with roots going back hundreds of years. Neither the Parliament nor the 33 political parties with seats in it have much power. Most voters stayed away from the last parliamentary election, in 2007, which saw the first international observation ever, largely achieved and funded by the USG. (The OSCE indicated it did not have enough notice to participate.) Additional reforms could lead to democracy, but, with stability a priority, it could take decades. End Summary.

External Issues

¶3. (SBU) OSCE: Morocco maintains a limited but growing role as a Mediterranean Partner for Cooperation with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Both the executive and legislative branches of government have participated in OSCE meetings and activities at high levels. At the November 2007 OSCE Ministerial in Madrid, the Moroccan representative reiterated the Government of Morocco's (GOM's) commitment to partnership with the OSCE, particularly in combating terrorism, organized crime, illegal migration and human trafficking. In December 2007, Morocco and Spain co-hosted an OSCE/International Labor Organization (ILO) seminar in Rabat to launch the Mediterranean edition of the Handbook on Establishing Effective Labor Migration Policies (with Israeli participation). Morocco hosted an earlier Mediterranean Seminar in Rabat in 2005.

¶4. (SBU) OSCE Continued: More recently, OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation Parliamentary Assembly President Goran Lennmarker and Vice President Joao Soares visited Morocco in April 2008 and met with the Speaker of the parliament's lower house, other parliamentarians, the Foreign Minister, and the President of the Consultative Council of Human Rights. In October 2008, Morocco sent three representatives to the Man-Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS) conference in Vienna, where they discussed concerns over the threat that MANPADS pose to the region and the

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movement of these weapons from conflict zones into the Sahara basin.

¶5. (SBU) Regional Military and Political Engagement: The GOM is also working toward a NATO Mediterranean Partnership Agreement. In October, Morocco signed an Advanced Status Agreement with the European Union, which could give Morocco complete free market access to the European Economic Area when finally implemented. It also provides for greater co-ordination on other issues. This is a unique enhancement of the Barcelona Process status, but many details will be filled in only through the course of lengthy discussions. Morocco also participates in French President Sarkozy's nascent Mediterranean Union.

¶6. (SBU) Peacekeeping: The GOM has robust experience in the realm of peacekeeping operations dating back to the 1960s. It has signed on to Operation Active Endeavor and is contributing to peacekeeping operations in Kosovo, under NATO leadership. Morocco also partnered with NATO in peacekeeping operations in Bosnia and with the United Nations (UN) in Angola, Cambodia, Haiti and Somalia. Current UN deployments are in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cote d'Ivoire. The GOM has expressed interest in expanding its peacekeeping capacity.

¶7. (SBU) Border Troubles with Algeria: The Moroccan relationship with Algeria is difficult, and the border between the two countries was closed by Algeria and remains closed. While the King and other GOM officials have publicly proposed opening the border and upgrading bilateral relations between the two countries, their entreaties have been repeatedly rebuffed. The GOA has linked progress on the border to "all issues," particularly the Western Sahara.

¶8. (SBU) Western Sahara: Moroccan foreign policy is dominated by defending and seeking international recognition of its sovereignty claims over Western Sahara. The issue remains the most visible source of tension with Algeria, which has historically supported the POLISARIO's quest efforts for independence by way of a UN-sponsored referendum.

The issue led Morocco to leave the African Union and has been an obstacle to regional integration through the Arab Maghreb Union. In April 2007, Morocco proposed a new

autonomy plan for Western Sahara, and a series of UN-sponsored negotiations with the POLISARIO began in Manhasset, New York. The Moroccan proposal, deemed "serious and credible" by the USG, would provide Sahrawis, the indigenous people of Western Sahara, autonomy in administering local affairs while respecting Moroccan sovereignty over the territory. There have been four rounds of talks but none since March 2008. After the April 2008 renewal of the mandate of the UN peacekeeping mission, the USG announced it considered independence for the territory "not realistic."

¶9. (SBU) Western Sahara Continued: Following the controversial lapsing of the contract of the former UN Secretary General's Personal Envoy, the UN selected retired U.S. Ambassador Chris Ross to be the new Personal Envoy, but the GOM has withheld its endorsement, pending review of a mandate from the UN that it hopes would favor its position. The USG has called for the new envoy to maintain past progress.

¶10. (SBU) Western Sahara Continued: Sahara experienced gross violations of human rights from 1975 until the end of the Hassan II regime and repression intensified after the short-lived Sahrawi "intifada" of 2005. Since late 2006, Morocco has slowly improved the human rights situation in the territories. Arbitrary arrests have sharply diminished and beatings and physical abuse by security forces have all but disappeared. Even dissenters now can travel freely. They cannot, however, publish or speak publicly in support of

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independence, or a vote on self-determination. In 2008, known abusers were transferred, further easing the situation.

Internal Issues

¶11. (SBU) Current Government: Prime Minister Abbas El Fassi's government, formed after the September 2007 legislative elections, is built on a minority coalition. There has been periodic speculation that it might not last for the full five-year mandate of Parliament. El Fassi's government, filled with young technocrats from within and outside his Istiqlal party, has performed better than many expected, however, and it now looks capable of a full term. El Fassi has participated extensively in international events and diplomacy. Internal democracy is growing within political parties. A political formation founded by Fouad Ali El Himma, an intimate of the King, has evolved into a new Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) by grouping several smaller parties. It has now constituted the largest political bloc in Parliament, and could be prepared to lead should the current coalition falter. We currently see no prospect for a significant shift in Morocco's foreign and security policies. However, neither Parliament nor the Prime Minister has much say in these issues, which are managed by the Throne directly with concerned ministries.

¶12. (SBU) Parliamentary Reform: Morocco's political parties and the bicameral parliament are weak and structurally hamstrung from taking legislative initiatives or strongly articulating dissent. The Parliament provides no effective check on the monarchy or government. Changing the Constitution would be necessary in order to change the power imbalance and institute formal democracy, but both Parliament and parties will have to improve their capacity and performance first. Nonetheless, both parties and Parliament have made some technical improvements, largely thanks to USG-funded programs from the National democratic Institute (NDI) and the State University of New York (SUNY), which have modestly improved the body's administrative capacity. These include establishment of a budget analysis office, a verbatim transcription service, and a consistent forum for training and debate among parliamentary members and staff.

¶13. (SBU) Parliamentary Reform Continued: Although the September 2007 parliamentary elections were the most transparent in the country's history, record low participation (i.e., 37 percent of registered voters) reflects the lack of voter confidence in the institution. The State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) funded NDI to run the first ever international observation. Morocco only consented to this less than three months before voting; the OSCE, when consulted, declined to participate, as it was too little notice.

¶14. (SBU) Human Rights and Reform: King Mohammed VI has embarked on an ambitious and continuous program of human rights reforms that includes the Arab world's first truth commission, a revised family code and growing governmental transparency and accountability. 2008 has seen some incidents of concern related to freedoms of expression and press. Although Morocco is a paragon of reform in the region, the reforms are still not deeply rooted in law or Constitution and could be rolled back. Continued support and encouragement from partners like the United States and Europe are essential.

¶15. (SBU) Counterterrorism: The terrorism threat in Morocco emanates especially from small grassroots radical Islamic cells, which have shown some capacity to cause attacks, but there has been no major damage since 2003. Security forces have arrested numerous terrorist cells. The biggest threat is that attacks could deter tourists, an important component

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of the economy. The GOM's implementation of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy emphasizing vigilant security measures, counter-radicalization policies, and robust international cooperation has been largely successful in containing the threat to date. Economic disruption, whether from attacks or the global economic crisis, remains the principal threat to stability here, but most observers believe Morocco will manage absent catastrophic collapse.

¶16. (SBU) Counterterrorism Continued: Under the King who as "Commander of the Faithful" leads Moroccan Muslims and Jews, Morocco has standardized religious doctrine, consolidated control over religious schools, and sent specially trained Imams to Europe to preach moderate messages to the Moroccan diaspora. The vast majority of Morocco's population rejects Salafist and Wahhabist approaches to Islam and so does not support terrorist groups.

¶17. (SBU) Religious Freedom: The Moroccan Constitution provides for the freedom to practice one's religion, although Islam is the official state religion. The GOM prohibits the distribution of non-Muslim religious materials, bans all proselytizing, but tolerates several small religious minorities. It also occasionally restricts Islamic organizations whose activities have exceeded the bounds of "acceptable religious practice" and become political in nature. Morocco has become protective and even positive toward the tiny remnant of its once substantial Jewish minority.

¶18. (SBU) Military Reform: The Moroccan Royal Armed Forces are modernizing but remain burdened by corruption, inefficient bureaucracy, and political marginalization. The U.S. enjoys a robust military relationship, as evidenced by increased U.S.-Moroccan military training exercises and Morocco's purchase of sophisticated weapons from the U.S., to include 24 F-16s, (a counter to an earlier Algerian purchase of advanced aircraft from Russia) in the last year. These point to a likely future reform of the military, along with greater prospects for positive engagement with the U.S.

¶19. (SBU) Drug Issues: The GOM has achieved significant reductions in cannabis and cannabis resin production in recent years, although it remains Europe's primary supplier.

Little, if any, is exported to the U.S.

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